

MUSICALIZING MURDER:
DEFINING THE 'TRUE CRIME MUSICAL'

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary musicals have experimented with the conventions previously established by Rodgers and Hammerstein and the so-called “Golden Age” era of musical theatre, often subverting and commenting upon these conventions. In order to better understand these new musicals and prepare audiences for the work they are about to see, these non-traditional musicals have been labeled under various new subcategories, such as the “gay musical,” the “rock musical,” and the “jukebox musical.” New subcategories assist in the comprehension of these contemporary musicals, and as Larry Stempel states, “familiarity with the genre provides a helpful tool not only to understand how different musicals work but also to enjoy such shows for what they are. A genre establishes a configuration of constraints and opportunities—the rules of the game, so to speak—by which creators create, performers perform, and audiences come to know what to expect” (4).

While the modern American drama is rife with images of dramatized violence, the musical genre has only recently begun to incorporate both realistic and symbolic representations of onstage violence. These musicals form a broad category of “violent musicals,” but shows that also integrate a historical murder narrative form a subcategory that I call the “true crime musical.” Taking inspiration from the literary genre of the same name, these true crime musicals present one or more murder narratives and construct a violent world of the play. The true crime musical fictionalizes motive, subverts musical theatre tropes, and comments on problems that persistently plague American society, such as poverty, the myth of the American Dream, and other inequities. This study features two distinctive contemporary musicals that possess the traits of a true crime musical—*Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* (music and lyrics by Stephen Dolginoff) and *Bonnie & Clyde* (music by Frank Wildhorn, lyrics by Don Black, and book by Ivan Menchell). Both musicals explore the motives of the murderer-protagonists, follow closely

the formula of true crime literature, all while utilizing or subverting traditional musical theatre tropes.

Through a careful dramaturgical analysis of the various violent elements and character motivations, this study seeks to define the true crime musical as a distinctive subgenre of musical theatre, discover how musical writers engage with violence, and explore what these musicals say about criminal motive. In this study, I will utilize published librettos and performance reviews, as well as cast recordings, filmed archival production footage, and personal interviews, in order to locate and define the true crime musical and its distinctive interrogation and representation of violence and motive. In defining a *true crime musical* subgenre, I hope to create an understanding of this unique form, as well as its distinctive representation of motive and how it challenges musical theatre conventions.

To Janis Johnson

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INTRODUCTION:

Criminalizing the American Musical

Since the theater is the art of make-believe, of self-contained realities, and of performing selves in their confrontation with a world made up of numerous oppositional forces, theater and violence tend to be convivial bedfellows.

Violence in American Drama:

Essays on its Staging, Meanings and Effects

Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz, Ramón Espejo Romero and Bernardo Muñoz Martínez

Broadway musical theater grabs our attention. It does so not only for its intrinsic qualities as an attention-grabber but also for its remarkable hold on different segments of the public over time. In its many guises, it has remained one of the most popular ongoing forms of live entertainment in the United States . . .

Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater

Larry Stempel

True crime presents killers as knowable subjects whose devious and transgressive actions can be understood through narrative dissection.

The Rise of True Crime

Jean Murley

Contemporary musicals have experimented with the conventions previously established by Rodgers and Hammerstein and the so-called “Golden Age” era of musical theatre, often subverting and commenting upon these conventions. In order to better understand these new musicals and prepare audiences for the work they are about to see, these non-traditional musicals have been labeled under various new subcategories, such as the “gay musical,” the “rock musical,” and the “jukebox musical.” New subcategories assist in the comprehension of these contemporary musicals, and as Larry Stempel states, “familiarity with the genre provides a helpful tool not only to understand how different musicals work but also to enjoy such shows for what they are. A genre establishes a configuration of constraints and opportunities—the rules of the game, so to speak—by which creators create, performers perform, and audiences come to know what to expect” (4).

While the modern American drama is rife with images of dramatized violence, the musical genre has abstained from violent drama in the past. In *Violence in American Drama*, Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz notes that:

[A]lmost all serious American dramatists, starting with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, and including María Irene Fornés, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee, Adrienne Kennedy, August Wilson, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Tony Kushner and Paula Vogel, have either represented violence in their plays or pointed to it as a source of anguish for their characters, who often resort to it in order to cope with such anguish. (3)

Despite violence's pervasive presence in American theatre, the writers of musical theatre have only recently begun dramatizing violent acts.

Frequently, composers and librettists who write for the musical genre construct stories of personal triumph. While early musicals often characterized an idyllic image of American life and presented characters audiences might want to emulate, recent developments in the musical genre have shifted focus to darker and more violent narratives that incorporate both realistic and symbolic representations of onstage violence. These musicals form a broad category of "violent musicals" that will be a topic for a future study. For the purpose of this study, I will examine a subgenre of musical that I refer to as the "true crime musical." In addition to representing violence onstage, these shows integrate a historical murder narrative and allude to the literary genre of the same name.

Librettists and composers have featured violence in musicals before, such as in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), and *West Side Story* (1957), but these musicals present fictional narratives in which the impact of the violence is lessened. Both *Sweeney Todd* and *Little Shop of Horrors* present violence comically; *Little*

Shop utilizes camp, while *Sweeney* diminishes the significance of the violence in part by pairing violent action to humorous lyrics. *West Side Story* may be realistic in its use of violence, but the most violent sequence involves a danced rumble, which is inherently artificial. This artificiality removes the spectator from the violent action. These fiction-based shows have contributed significantly to the musical genre, but my specific interest lies in exploring musicals whose plots are rooted in historical murder narratives, as they present a unique challenge for audiences. In what ways do audiences respond to musicals that are adapted from true murder stories? How does the spectator view violence that is both truthful and realistically horrific? For the purpose of this study, I am limiting my scope to musicals that fall under a subcategory that I refer to as the *true crime musical*. Taking inspiration from the literary genre of the same name, these true crime musicals present one or more murder narratives and construct a violent world of the play. The true crime musical fictionalizes motive, subverts musical theatre tropes, and comments on problems that persistently plague American society, such as poverty, the myth of the American Dream, and other inequities.

This study features two contemporary musicals that explore the motives of the murderer-protagonists, while dramatizing acts of violence in order to construct a definition of the true crime musical. While both musicals share some similarities, such as offering a romantic plot as a feature of the narrative, in actuality, they offer two very distinct versions of a true crime musical. Stephen Dolginoff's *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*, which dramatizes the famous 1924 kidnap-murder of Bobby Franks, is an intimate and psychologized look into a seductive and abusive relationship; while Frank Wildhorn, Don Black, and Ivan Menchell's *Bonnie & Clyde* is an exploration of the American Dream mythology that drives its protagonists to crime. Through a careful dramaturgical analysis of the various violent elements and character motivations, this

study seeks to define the true crime musical as a distinctive subgenre of musical theatre, discover how musical writers engage with violence, and explore what these musicals say about criminal motive. In this study, I will utilize published librettos and performance reviews, as well as cast recordings, filmed archival production footage, and personal interviews, in order to locate and define the true crime musical and its distinctive interrogation and representation of violence and motive.

In my research, I have noticed a parallel between the true crime literary genre and a subcategory of musicals which, as of yet, has not been defined. This brings me to the main term I will use in this study. The *true crime musical* shares many of the same conventions as its literary counterpoint. In *The Rise of True Crime*, Jean Murley explains the foundations and patterns that a true crime book exhibits. These books typically depict one murder event, or a trail of murders from one killer (or killers). Its narrative focus is on the killer's personal history and psychological motivations for the murder event in an effort to encourage reader sympathy. The result is often a romanticizing of the killer or killers (2). Often writers construct the narrative as a way of "bringing the reader or viewer into closer relationship with real killers by drawing us 'into the minds' of such people" (3). Psychology becomes imperative, as a means of understanding human nature. Readers look to true crime, according to Murley, to "furnish answers to serious questions about human behavior" (3), often through fictionalizing motive. True crime stories incorporate a certain level of fiction, with writers expanding upon the known facts in order to provide criminal motive or explain other ambiguous details. She states, "true crime always fictionalizes, emphasizes, exaggerates, interprets, constructs, and creates 'truth,' and any relationship to the facts is mediated and compromised" (13). When authors invent or expand upon motive, they seek to answer these basic "human" questions. Though we may never

truly know why someone committed a murder, true crime stories can help alleviate our anxieties by illuminating the potential reasons. In this regard, motive becomes paramount in true crime narratives.

True crime is perhaps best known for its descriptive and gruesome imagistic storytelling. Murley refers to this as “crime porn” (5), grotesque depictions of “full-on visual body horror,” that consist of gunshot wounds, autopsy imagery, blood spatters, and other visual images that denote gross violence. The genre incorporates this “crime porn” for entertainment reasons, as readers curiously crave horror; however, “crime porn” is also utilized as a method for reminding readers of the villain’s transgressions. When faced with horrific corpse imagery, the reader cannot fully sympathize with the murderer. This duality of sympathy/horror is representative of the true crime genre. Finally, “[i]n true crime, the killers are usually incarcerated or executed at the end of the story, reassuring us with a good old-fashioned reordering of the chaos wrought by crime” (3). Ultimately, the true crime writer must balance a reader’s potential for emotionally identifying with—while keeping their moral distance from—the killer or killers. The true crime musical shares in the elements listed above, while incorporating much of the musical genre’s conventions.

There are many significant reasons for establishing distinct musical subcategories. As Larry Stempel argues in *Showtime*, “[t]he musical’ eludes easy definition” and the simplest definition of “musical” is a “type of performance made up of the basic creative processes [such as] talking . . . singing . . . and dancing” (2-3). This definition can be misleading in its simplicity, leaving potential audience members without a clear guideline. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, subcategories create meaning when faced with the enormous variety seen in the musical genre. As Stempel suggests, the subcategory constructs “the rules of the game, so to

speak—by which creators create, performers perform, and audiences come to know what to expect” (4).

In naming these musicals *true crime*, I hope to create an understanding of this unique form and its distinctive representation of motive and musical theatre convention. Additionally, I will refer to the protagonist in the true crime musical as a *criminal-protagonist* or a *murderer-protagonist*, which will act as a reminder of these characters’ double function. Writers of the true crime musical construct sympathetic characters from murderer-protagonists, so it becomes imperative to remember that they also commit violent actions. Just as the reader of true crime literature never forgets what the killer has done, we should not forget that the musicals’ protagonists are criminals and murderers.

These true crime musicals are less likely appeal to Broadway audiences and producers, since they incorporate violence and present particularly unsettling material—elements that are still uncommon in mainstream commercial theatre. Consequently, one of the musicals in this study has not had a Broadway debut, but rather, has enjoyed relative success on a much smaller scale. Broadway must not be the only barometer of successful musical theatre; small-scale productions are more likely to be provocative and exciting, with the potential for being groundbreaking new material. Non-Broadway musicals, in general, receive little scholarly attention, and they necessitate further study because they often dramatize riskier material. Since these smaller scale musicals are not as dependent upon ticket sales (their budgets are significantly smaller), they often facilitate provoking discussions about significant human and social topics. Kirsten Childs, a book writer for new musicals, argues:

. . . I see a lot of new work that’s interesting . . . by writers who are unafraid to try new approaches to musical theater form and by writers who are unashamedly embracing

traditional musical theater to explore new themes . . . Because of them and others yet to come, musical theater will continue to flourish. Maybe it'll take a while before a lot of Broadway producers take the kinds of chances on new shows that they used to. Or maybe those days are gone for good. That just means that Broadway's not going to be where you go to see great, interesting, cutting-edge musical theater. (qtd. in Stempel 657)

Therefore, I will first explore *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*, the intimate and minimalistic musical that has not had a Broadway production. I will contrast this with *Bonnie & Clyde*, which had a limited Broadway run. This organization allows for a chronological approach—in production dates as well as historical context. It is also helpful to utilize *Thrill Me*'s stripped down production as a starting point from which we can view the gruesome imagery and realistic violence of *Bonnie & Clyde*. Essentially, we will see how the onstage violence escalates from *Thrill Me*'s unseen victim to *Bonnie & Clyde*'s rising body count.

The first chapter of this study will focus on Stephen Dolginoff's *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*, which debuted as part of the Fourth Annual Midtown International Theatre Festival at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex in New York City in 2003. The York Theatre Company subsequently produced it Off-Broadway in 2005, and the musical has since enjoyed an international and regional life, including a five-year run in Seoul, South Korea. This two-person musical dramatizes the famous Chicago murder of Bobby Franks in 1924, but focuses on the abusive relationship between Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. Despite the lack of literal onstage violence, Dolginoff's command of violent language and specific disturbing stage properties creates an unsettling stage picture. His focus on the absent victim and the killers' dominant-submissive sexual relationship creates a psychologically driven and threatening musical about relationships and murder.

Chapter two will examine Frank Wildhorn, Ivan Menchell, and Don Black's *Bonnie & Clyde*, which premiered at the La Jolla Playhouse in 2009 before opening on Broadway at the Gerard Schoenfeld Theatre on December 1, 2011. Though it had a Broadway run, it was not as financially or critically successful as *Thrill Me*, closing after only thirty-three previews and thirty-six performances. *Bonnie & Clyde* dramatizes the two-year crime spree of the famous duo during the Great Depression. Wildhorn, et al. offers up the mythology of the American Dream, presenting disillusioned folks who steal what the world will not freely offer. In this musical, realistic violence features prominently, but the most visually gruesome images center around the criminal-protagonists, themselves; thereby making their murder more prominent than the murders they commit against others.

This study explores these two musicals as evidence of a true crime musical subcategory that dramatizes violence while subverting typical musical theatre conventions. While Raymond Knapp's two-part series, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, provides an excellent foundation on the collective and individual experience in musical theatre, Knapp neglects to interrogate the role of violence in the musical genre. Additionally, texts that historicize musicals by placing them in their cultural and social contexts are plentiful. The aforementioned *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* by Larry Stempel has proved valuable in understanding cultural trends in the American musical. However, this study does not seek to historicize or catalog these musicals, but rather analyze how violence is assimilated into the musical genre.

There has been a significant amount of scholarship concerning theatrical violence, its staging, and effects upon an audience. According to Vladimir J. Konecni, "the theater has [always] been preoccupied with every conceivable form of anger and violence, both thematically

and theoretically” (qtd. in Ozieblo 216). Mark Pizzato’s *Theatres of Human Sacrifice* argues a connection between real-world violence and the long history of theatrical and ritualized violence, while Lisa Fitzpatrick’s “Performance of Violence and the Ethics of Spectatorship,” details the potential traumatic response a spectator may experience due to staged violence. She argues, “[t]he representation of violence, equally, can create a visceral or morphological response in the spectator through a momentary identification with the vulnerability of (all) bodies” (66). While her essay has led me to consider audience response to these true crime musicals, she does not delve into the specific issues that musical theatre brings. Musicals are openly unrealistic, and audience reactions to musicalized violence may differ greatly from realistically staged violence. Amnon Kabatchnik’s *Blood on the Stage* series catalogs several “milestone plays of crime, mystery, and detection” between the years of 1900-1925, 1925-1950, 1950-1975, and most recently 1975-2000. The series provides historical context for each play, a brief playwright biography, a plot synopsis, and critical reception to the work. While his series has been invaluable due to its comprehensive nature, Kabatchnik’s series provides an overview of each play, rather than a detailed analysis. While many of these historical texts and theories can and should be applied to the genre of musical theatre, no significant study has been dedicated to the role that violence or true crime plays within musicals. The contemporary musicals examined herein dramatize violence, follow closely the formula of true crime literature, all while utilizing or subverting traditional musical theatre tropes. This study seeks to bridge theories of staged violence and true crime with musical theatre scholarship in an effort to define and understand the true crime musical.

CHAPTER 1

“Relationships Can Be Murder”: Murder and the Marriage Trope in *Thrill Me*

The musical . . . Is not closet drama at all. It brings what is closeted to the stage in the spirit of performance . . . But everyone has a closet. This theatre is prepared to open the door and be gleeful with what it finds there. It is not that the contents of repression are represented. It is that they are reformulated into what may look like the triviality of song and dance, catching power off-guard, and insisting in its ensemble tendency that this invasion of our privacy is not so much psychological as it is political. Or at least it yearns to be political. Most musicals, including most good musicals, are not overtly political. But they belong to a theatre aesthetic that looks toward the political, not with the direct glare of Brecht and not with the sidelong glance of Kierkegaard, but with full regard for the principles of difference that we have been finding at the heart of the genre.

The Musical as Drama
Scott McMillin

The title of this chapter, “Relationships can be murder,” comes from the tag line for the Off-Broadway production of Stephen Dolginoff’s *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*. Dolginoff, who wrote the musical’s score, lyrics, and book, conceived the show as an intimate look at a relationship gone wrong, and the desperate actions taken by those claimed by love. Dramatizing one of the most infamous American murders, and despite its lack of onstage violence, *Thrill Me* is a true crime musical, because it narrates a murder, psychologizes the murderer-protagonists, fictionalizes history, and subverts conventional musical theatre tropes. *Thrill Me* dramatizes a murder and a perverted marriage plot, in which characters are obsessive, oppressive, and ultimately violent.

The musical utilizes the infamous 1924 murder of fourteen-year-old¹ Bobby Franks as the vehicle to tell a larger story about infatuation and relationships. In 1924 Chicago, wealthy nineteen-year-olds Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were arrested for the kidnap-murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks. These smart University of Chicago students were fixated with the Nietzschean ideal of “Superman,” and eventually confessed to the murder when the police

¹ Historically, Bobby was fourteen, but the musical references his age as twelve.

discovered a large amount of evidence against them. The boys stated that their motive was strictly an experiment to see if they could commit the perfect crime. The murder became the “Crime of the Century,” and newspapers dubbed the boys the famous “thrill killers.”

Leopold and Loeb’s story has been adapted previously; most notably Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film, *Rope*, which is based on Patrick Hamilton’s 1929 play of the same name, and Richard Fleischer’s 1959 film *Compulsion*, based on Meyer Levin’s 1956 novel. Previous adaptations have focused on the murder and trial, especially defense attorney Clarence Darrow’s impassioned closing arguments against capital punishment. What Dolginoff provides is a psychologically motivated narrative that focuses on their dynamic, and the motivations that led to the murder. By creating a space that is full of symbolic threat, rather than literal threat, Dolginoff constructs a deeply powerful and tension-saturated narrative that focuses on its two characters and their relationship. Ultimately, *Thrill Me* cautions against the kind of love that devolves into obsession and violence. He subverts the conventional marriage plot, not only by exploring queer themes, but also by dramatizing an emotionally abusive relationship.

Dolginoff, who received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Dramatic Writing from New York University, always had an interest in true crime stories, which is what drew him to the subject of the Leopold and Loeb case.² That interest, coupled with a love for traditional musicals, is what inspired *Thrill Me*. Originally produced as part of the Fourth Annual Midtown International Theatre Festival at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex in New York City, *Thrill Me* had its official premiere on July 16, 2003. The subsequent Off-Broadway production was produced by The York Theatre Company and opened on May 26, 2005. There have been approximately 100 productions as of this writing, both in regional American theatres as well as international performance spaces. A Korean-language version has been running in Seoul, Korea

² Email interview with Stephen Dolginoff, February 20, 2013.

continuously since 2007; and likewise, a Japanese translation in Tokyo since 2011. There was also a Greek translation produced in Athens and a German production in Datteln, Germany. The musical also came to the West End for a brief production at the Charing Cross Theatre in 2011. *Thrill Me* productions in Belgium, Brazil, Austria, and Switzerland are forthcoming.³

Why has this intimate, two-person musical enjoyed such universal appeal? What is it about *Thrill Me* that resonates on a domestic and international level? It is *Thrill Me*'s unique marriage of murder narrative, motive, and romance plot, which makes it popular and engaging. Dolginoff wrote a musical about a murder that occurred in 1924, but he also wrote a musical that communicates a larger message of love and longing—and the extreme possibilities that can occur when that love is abused.

The musical opens on a fifty-four year old Nathan Leopold, who is meeting with the Parole Board of the Joliet Prison. This is Nathan's fifth time before the Board; they have denied him parole previously because of a perceived lack of remorse for the murder he committed when he was nineteen. The musical jumps between 1924 and the parole hearing in 1958. Both the character and historical figure of Richard Loeb is the quintessential sociopath, defined as "a person who has no conscience but can function in society" (Murley 4), while Nathan Leopold is the man who is unremittingly in love with him. In *Thrill Me*, Dolginoff eschews sensationalism in favor of a gripping, psychological tale of infatuation and murder.

In *Violence in American Drama*, Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz, et al., states that violence is "an instrument of control and subjugation" (1); no other musical represents this dictum more fully than *Thrill Me*. In Dolginoff's musical, violence occurs between the two murderer-protagonists, as well as against fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks. Ultimately, it is the relationship between Loeb and Leopold, which drives the narrative and causes the subsequent violent action.

³ Email interview with Stephen Dolginoff, February 18, 2013.

Dolginoff states in his Author's Note that precedes the libretto, "*Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* is a dramatic musical about a relationship, not about a murder. The murder is part of the plot of course, but it is not the dramatic focus. The dynamics of the relationship and its twists, turns, manipulations, shifts of power and ultimate surprise conclusion create the true drama and most compelling aspects of the show" (5). *Thrill Me* subverts the most traditional of all musical genre conventions: that of the marriage/love trope.

Thrill Me takes liberties with the conventional romance plot that typifies the musical genre. According to Scott McMillin, classic musical theatre incorporated "Marriage [and] all musicals seemed to be romantic comedies ending in the embrace of heroes and heroines" (182). In general, this romance characterizes an idyllic and heteronormative male/female love story. In *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp states, "The American Musical has been most consistently successful when its stories and themes resolve through the formation of conventional romantic relationships." A "conventional romantic relationship," according to Knapp, is "a union that will be in human terms most convincing and in musical terms most satisfying—which is to say, a romantic, heterosexual union" (264). However, Knapp argues that "the relationships one creates and/or sees onstage both in fairly literal terms and in figurative or symbolic terms, as standing in for a range of possible relationships, including homosexual ones" (264-5). If heterosexual relationships can stand in for homosexual ones, then can the reverse apply? I argue that, though the characters are both male, *Thrill Me*'s warning against obsessive love and manipulation may apply to all relationships. The musical should not be diminished by its use of homosexual characters.

Thrill Me is not the first musical to incorporate queer themes into its plot; according to Stempel, *Falsettos* (1992), "played a key role in the development of a new [genre of musical]:

the ‘gay musical.’ Gay musicals made homosexuality their theme and placed it at center stage” (661). While *Thrill Me* might be labeled a “gay musical,” because homosexual characters are featured and a queer “romance” is explored, I believe this may be a dangerous label because of the nature of the show’s violent plot. Dolginoff does not connect homosexuality with criminality—being gay does not make you a homicidal sociopath—but rather, he communicates a larger message that obsessive love can lead to violence (in this case, violence against a third party as well as between the “romantic” couple). In fact, *Thrill Me* shares more in common with Stephen Sondheim’s *Passion* (1994), which dramatizes the transformative nature of love and sex, than with *La Cage aux Folles*⁴ (1983), a farcical musical that features drag entertainment. That *Thrill Me* dramatizes a deviant sexual relationship does not infer that homosexuality is inherently deviant or indicative of immorality. Knapp, in his book *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, posits that there are three ways to interpret homosexuality in popular entertainment. They include, “the partial celebration of such alternatives for their spirit of independence and liberating effect;” a “fostering of increased understanding of alternativity;” and lastly, “The ultimate punishment of alternativity” (206-7). While Leopold and Loeb are ultimately punished in the musical by being imprisoned, this has more to do with historical fact and with how Dolginoff has fictionalized the coercive nature of the relationship to include its shocking plot twist, rather than a cautionary tale against homoeroticism. The way in which Dolginoff expands upon their relationship, however—in taking the dominant/submissive nature to the extreme—does serve as a warning for all relationships. As Dolginoff says, “It’s an

⁴ Though *Falsettos* reinvigorated the subcategory, *La Cage aux Folles* is typically considered the first “gay musical.”

unconventional love story in a lot of ways, [but] every once in a while you feel yourself relating to them. And that's scary.”⁵

In the dramatization, Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold’s relationship is a complicated dance of possession and control. From the very first moment Dolginoff introduces Richard Loeb, the stage directions establish him as predatory: “*From behind, darkly handsome Richard Loeb, nineteen, enters, slowly approaching like a predator stalking his prey, and purposefully startles him*” (13). Nathan, attempting to show ownership over him, puts his hand on Richard’s shoulder, but Richard “pushes” it off (14). Dolginoff writes that Nathan is “*like a slave to his master*” (16). In the first flashback scene, we learn that Richard has been denying Nathan, and they have not seen one another for quite some time:

When you cut off all our contact
How it hurt.
But I know you like to make me
Feel like dirt. (15)

Within the first few moments, Dolginoff establishes a dominant-submissive relationship between the duo, wherein Richard is the controller who enjoys emotionally abusing Nathan, who later confides to the Parole Board, “It was a game he [Richard] always liked to play to humiliate me. He’d stand me up, leave me stranded places, go away on a summer vacation without saying goodbye. Things like that” (13). This 1924 flashback scene further establishes the twisted relationship:

RICHARD. Unlike you, there are other people I like to spend time with.

NATHAN. I don’t care about those other people.

⁵ Taken from a review of *Thrill Me*. Jay Rath, “*Thrill Me* explores the relationship of Leopold and Loeb.” 19 June 2009. Web.

RICHARD. Good for you.

NATHAN. Because I know they don't mean anything to you.

RICHARD. (*Moving to leave*) And neither do you. Now, goodbye. (*Nathan blocks his path.*) Auf wiedersehn. (*Nathan moves to block him again.*) Move! (*He pushes Nathan away.*) The others aren't so fucking annoying! (14)

Not only is the relationship an emotional push/pull, but there is a literal sense of danger contained in the dialogue. This scene establishes the relationship as emotionally abusive, but also teeming with the potential for violence. Here, Dolginoff writes Nathan's attempts to gain control—physically—and he loses when Richard pushes him aside. This sequence serves as a warning for the violent action that will occur later in the musical against the unseen Bobby.

Dolginoff does not provide historical context, presumably because there are only two characters and opening the world of the play to external forces would undoubtedly diminish the tension of the narrative. However, historically, Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold's relationship would be seen as perverse and improper. Though Dolginoff does not make it explicit, certain moments contained in the musical suggest the social pressure to remain closeted. In the scene above, for example, there is a sense that Richard is not comfortable with Nathan's acts of possessiveness, and he pulls away because of those societal implications. In the same scene, Nathan sings:

Tell me, who's the girl in which sorority?

I got word on good authority.

How can you assume she's worthy of you?

She's not me!

And I know there were several others.

According to your frat house brothers!

I even heard you passed around one or two . . . (15)

Nathan criticizes Richard's rejection of him in favor of female companionship—companionship that may be a façade in order to impress the “frat house brothers.” Nathan argues that he shares a bond with Richard that no one else can:

Tell me, who can you have conversations with?

Share your twisted observations with?

Who else has a roughly similar view,

If not me?” (14)

Their relationship is defined by their shared (“twisted”) views, but what does Nathan mean—which views? Nathan does not want to take part in Richard's crimes; he acquiesces because of his love for him, so the link he mentions in the above quote does not refer to a shared interest in crime. Richard knows Nathan is not interested in crime—that is why he must coerce him to participate—so even if Nathan were lying, Richard would know. If Nathan is not referring to crime, then the shared bond must be in reference to a romantic relationship that supersedes the connections Richard is having with the sorority girls.

That the relationship is an unhealthy one is an understatement. Richard constantly threatens to cut off his affections if Nathan will not participate in his illicit plans. When Nathan tells him he does not want to participate in arson, Richard responds, “Hey, if you don't want to be with me... (*He starts to move away.*)” and when Nathan finally agrees, Richard rewards him with a “*hard kiss on the lips*” (16). The stage directions make the relationship quite clear: criminal deviance will be rewarded with romantic intimacy. Likewise, criminality acts as an aphrodisiac for Richard; Nathan tells the Parole Board, “Richard got so excited when he started

the fire” (17). Violence, coercion and control are ultimately sexually motivating for Richard. The following dialogue demonstrates the manipulative and abusive nature of their relationship:

RICHARD. Look at it smolder! It’s breathtaking! And you know what a little misdemeanor does for me, Babe.

NATHAN. You haven’t called me “Babe” in a long time.

RICHARD. (*Playfully*) Because I know you like it.

NATHAN. That is cruel, you son of a bitch.

RICHARD. You like that too.

NATHAN. Touch me.

RICHARD. Ask me nicer.

NATHAN. Fuck you!

RICHARD. Fuck you back!

NATHAN. Please touch me. (*Richard softly caresses Nathan as he begins to sing, keeping one eye on the fire*). (18)

This dialogue leads into “There’s Nothing Like a Fire,” a song that musically aligns with a traditional romantic ballad. Removed from its context, the lyrics could describe the warmth felt as one sits by a romantic fire. Within its context, though, the song communicates the arousal Richard feels after committing arson and serves as his seduction of Nathan. With “There’s Nothing Like a Fire,” Dolginoff creates a chilling, yet nudge-wink nod to the conventional romance songs in musical theatre. The song includes lyrics such as:

There’s nothing like
A warm, romantic fire
To put me in the proper frame of mind.

There's nothing like a roaring, raging fire

To help me unwind.

Not only is Richard sexually aroused from criminal activity (“put me in the proper frame of mind”), he also finds Nathan more attractive: “There’s nothing like the glow of sizzling embers / To brighten your face.” (18). The dysfunction of their relationship is the ultimate subversion of musical theatre’s marriage convention. Dolginoff even creates a moment during which Richard and Nathan sing together, thereby yielding to the musical theatre tradition of love duets.

Typically, “[i]n a conventional love duet, there is generally a period of negotiation before the couple sings together in perfect alignment, without which it is no true duet;”⁶ once Nathan reluctantly joins Richard, the song becomes a traditional musical theatre romantic duet—about arson and sex.

Dolginoff introduces the murder plot as a result of Richard tiring of petty crimes, such as arson and theft. When Richard tells Nathan he wants to commit murder, and Nathan initially refuses—“I don’t want to do any of it. (*He moves to touch Richard.*) Can’t we just...”—Richard punishes him by stating, “If you don’t want to be part of my fun, I’m certainly not going to be part of yours” (22). Once again, Dolginoff links the manipulative nature of the relationship with Richard’s desire to engage in criminality, who encourages that they sign a contract⁷ detailing a *quid pro quo* relationship (“A Written Contract”). This contract states that Richard will get Nathan’s participation in any criminal activity he desires, and in return, he will “*satisfy*” Nathan (23; original emphasis). They sanction the deal with a little bloodletting (at Richard’s request, they must seal the contract with their own blood). Richard grabs a “*sharp-looking pocket knife*,”

⁶ Knapp, Raymond. *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, p. 305.

⁷ Historically, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb did have a signed contract that detailed their relationship. It was called, “For Robert’s Sake,” and it stated that Nathan would participate in criminal activities, as long as Richard pleased him with sex. See John Theodore’s *Evil Summer: Babe Leopold, Dickie Loeb, and the Kidnap-Murder of Bobby Franks*, p. 17.

and pokes Nathan to draw blood in order to sign the contract. Here, Dolginoff confirms Richard's distorted view that violence and pleasure are inexplicably linked: "Trust me, you'll enjoy a little pain" (24). After cutting Nathan, Richard "*plunges the blade into his own finger, causing Nathan to wince*" (24). This action demonstrates Richard as the lead once more, as he is in control of the violence. Richard can enact violence against Nathan or himself, but he does not allow Nathan to use the knife on himself. In this way, violence acts as the ultimate tool of subjugation, and only once the contract has been signed, and violence has been performed (via the bloodletting), does the relationship truly change:

Now our lives will be—
Entwined completely!
Our friendship's now redefined,
Rethought and revised! (24)

Only when violence has occurred, does the "friendship" change.

Their relationship is not just sexual, but emotional as well. Nathan becomes dependent on Richard—"I'm the one who needs Richard!" (16; original emphasis)—and he later explains his participation in the murder as occurring because, "His friendship was necessary to me. I had no choice" (29). Nathan is so consumed by his love and infatuation with Richard, that it drives him against his own morality; after the murder, Nathan confesses, "It was impossible to run away / Or let my conscience guide me" (34). The relationship is not one-sided, either, as Richard even admits his reliance upon Nathan:

NATHAN. I'm not trying to stop *you*, but you don't need my help breaking the law.

RICHARD. (*Reluctantly.*) Yes I do...I...I screw up without you. (22)

Later, after they are caught, Richard admits to himself his own fear of losing Nathan's respect (and possibly his love). In "Afraid," he sings, "I can't let you see. / If I show a slight touch of weakness / You'd change your opinion of me!" (57). This is one of the few times that Dolginoff allows the audience to see a more emotional side of Richard. In these lines, we deduce that Richard actually cares for Nathan, and is not limited to the sense of superiority and control we have seen earlier in the show.

Richard tends to be the controlling figure, but Dolginoff also creates moments for Nathan to take charge, thereby constructing a constantly fluctuating dominant-submissive relationship. During "Thrill Me," Nathan demands that Richard "satisfy" him after having committed several petty crimes (28). The role of master/servant changes after they have (offstage) intercourse, when Richard tells Nathan, "You know what would thrill *me*, Nathan? . . . A more important crime. A *superior* crime" (29); this is when he proposes the murder scheme. Richard exploits Nathan's love for him, stating, "As of tonight we're even. Now you have to help me or you'll break the contract" (30). The scene is chilling and oppressive, and once again, Dolginoff connects abuse with love:

NATHAN. *Now you're scaring me.*

RICHARD. But that's what you like, isn't it? (30)

The manipulation between the two characters is only a precursor to the violence that is to come. After the murder occurs, Richard is energized and gets violent with Nathan. He "*snaps the murder rope loudly, making Nathan jump*" (37). Nathan tries to back away, "You're scaring me!" Richard grabs him, stating, "Now let's cap off one superior...(he beckons Nathan towards him.) Night!—(he pulls Nathan in for a tight embrace.) (40). Dolginoff connects sex and

violence for the murderer-protagonists, and presents the aphrodisiac quality of violence, thereby illuminating potential reasons behind the “thrill kill.”

The murder, in fact, is the ultimate bond between the two murderer-protagonists; Nathan tells the Parole Board, “It soon would be done / And then he’d be tied to me forever” (35); the murder act having wholly connected the two is exactly what Nathan wanted. Additionally, in an original plot twist, Dolginoff fictionalizes the final motive for the murder. Seeing no way to exist without Richard, Nathan orchestrated the “botched” cover-up. He provided the evidence the police needed to ultimately convict them: he left his glasses⁸ at the murder site intentionally, and kept the murder weapons, as well as their signed contract (54). Nathan did this so that they would be caught, and then he would pretend to take a deal from the State. Knowing Richard, Nathan correctly assumed he would talk him into rejecting the deal: “No, it’s not too late. There’s still a way for us to be together ...” (54). The song that follows, “Keep Your Deal with Me” is a musical reprise of “Roadster,”⁹ a musical association between both manipulative songs—one representing murder, while the other represents love. By connecting the two songs musically, Dolginoff demonstrates that both Nathan and Bobby are Richard’s victims.

Having concocted the murder and “cover-up” as a way for them to be together forever, Nathan proves his love/infatuation with Richard is greater than his own need for survival:

RICHARD. What if we got the death penalty?

NATHAN. As long as we were together. (60)

⁸ Historically, Leopold’s glasses were found at the murder site, and they were the primary reason why Leopold and Loeb were caught. The glasses had a rare frame that only three people in the area owned. Dolginoff invented the idea that Leopold left them at the site on purpose, but it is probable, given that neither Leopold nor Loeb provided many details about the crime, the cover-up, or their relationship. This allows writers a lot of room for interpretation. For more historical information, see John Theodore’s *Evil Summer*.

⁹ *Thrill Me* original score, p. 102.

Nathan, seeing no other way to have Richard to himself, conceived of an immoral plot to keep him: “We’re gonna spend the rest of our lives in a cage together like two rare birds. Now you’ll never be able to leave me. . . . It’s funny how the whole world keeps saying the murder had no reason. Because it did have a reason. For me to have you all to myself. Even in prison. You know that’s what I’ve always wanted” (59). The scene concludes with a gleeful “Life Plus Ninety-Nine Years,” in which Nathan boasts his ability to have Richard with him until their deaths:

We’ll be together

For life—

Plus ninety-nine years!

I’ll keep you focused,

No outside forces!

For life plus ninety-nine years

Who’s in control now? (59)

Ultimately, *Thrill Me* is a romance story; Nathan commits atrocities under the title of love.

The musical cautions against the dangers inherent in obsessive love, but also potentially warns against a society that criminalizes homosexuality, as these boys were left with nothing but their obsession and passion, responding to a community that said their love was wrong. Despite the community at large not having a physical presence in the musical, many directors of *Thrill Me* feel the contextual implications are imperative to understanding Dolginoff’s narrative.

Christopher Zinovitch, who directed the Seattle premiere at ArtsWest in 2011, stated that in *Thrill Me*, “the relationship is the star, and it’s the manipulation of these two men, how they manipulate each other, how they manipulate themselves, and how society has manipulated them

to believe that their homosexuality is wrong.” In an interview for the *Vital Voice*, director Brooke Edwards¹⁰ stated:

The story of Leopold and Loeb is timeless. It is beyond their crime and their eventual punishments. I find it is their relationship that was so compelling. They manipulated each other and were seduced by one another and Nietzsche and his writings. They lived in a time and social standing that didn't allow for someone to be a homosexual. This alone drove Nathan Leopold to be manipulated by Richard Loeb, strictly because he was lonely and wanted love and he could trust Richard to keep it discreet. . . . I hope audiences leave not judging these two boys . . . But realizing we are all capable of making decisions that we may later regret, for love—for someone's affections, whether gay or straight. Loneliness, need and want can drive us to be seduced and manipulated, just like these boys.

When I asked Dolginoff what he thought about this statement, he agreed, adding that *Thrill Me* offers universal significance that anyone can be consumed by love to this extreme—regardless of their sexuality.¹¹ These directors' interpretations of the musical's social context are enlightening, but *Thrill Me*'s message does not need to be limited only to the queer community.

Even though Bobby's murder occurs offstage, it is a vital aspect of the musical. The presence of the murder—and of Bobby—cannot be ignored. In his essay, “Spectral Readings,” Andrew Sofer discusses how immaterial objects that remain unseen are “incorporeal yet are crucial to the performed event.” He discusses his theory of “dark matter,” which he refers to as “the ‘not there’ of theatre.” These items, such as Bobby's unseen corpse, are, according to Sofer's theory, “Materially absent though phenomenologically inescapable” (332), leaving an

¹⁰ Edwards directed a production at the Gaslight Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri in 2011.

¹¹ Personal email with Stephen Dolginoff, February 18, 2013.

indelible mark upon the audience. In fact, Sofer argues that “Much as the vast majority of the universe’s mass is constituted by what remains transparent, most of the event we call theatre or performance depends on felt absences” (332). The absence of the corpse and not seeing the murder occur onstage can still arouse horror. The fact that there is no physical body, may lead the audience to imagine a worse outcome, and create horror in the imagining of the body. Utilizing a physical actor as a corpse prop, may even distract audiences from the reality of the scene, as live actors “playing dead” often draw attention to their own “liveness.” Having the murder occur offstage creates the reality of the murder in the audience member’s mind. Language and stage properties take the place of physical violence in the musical, and create a reference for the audience’s imagination.

Richard begins to discuss “The Plan,” a chilling musical number that speculates a number of different ways to murder someone:

We could chloroform a rag
And make him breathe the vapors
Then use it as a gag
To choke him.
And once his face is green
We’ll throw him in a bag
Flee the murder scene
Then read about it in the papers. (31)

Richard, ever the criminal mastermind, considers an alternative murder method, one that increases the horrific nature of the violent act and demonstrates his glee at “playing” with the victim before committing the deed:

We could borrow some old gun
And shoot him in his slumber
Perhaps it would be fun
To torture him!
We'll make it look like rape!
And once the deed is done
We'll misdirect the cops
And watch his name
Become a number! (31)

Nathan is initially disgusted by the murder plan, but Richard sways him once again with sex, saying, "You know how excited it'll make me. Let's see...a ten or eleven-year old..." The stage directions then dictate: "*He sings into Nathan's ear, stroking his hair, holding his hand...drawing him in,*" and then he begins to describe the murder plot:

I'll lure him to my car
Then strike with something sizable.
We'll drive out extra far
To dump him.
Pour acid on his face
And every birthmark, mole or scar.
Then strip off all his clothing
So he'll be unrecognizable! (32)

Nathan, convinced by Richard, joins him for the end of the song, in another twisted duet. Nathan makes obvious the reasons for his agreement, stating the murder will "Bait the fish to feed the

shark” (32); for Nathan, the “shark” is sex, and for Richard it is his need for criminal deviance. The song also repeats the word “kill” or “killed” eleven times and acts as an introduction to the violent action about to occur.

Language in *Thrill Me* is extremely violent and provocative, and takes the place of onstage violence. Andrew Sofer theorizes that “dark matter,” such as the unseen murder, “is conjured by language . . . [but] not reducible to language;” the “effects transcend . . . dialogue to produce the effects *beyond* language” (335). Since the murder occurs offstage, language becomes the descriptive factor that creates for the audience’s imagination, the visual of the murder. Doginoff recreates the famous murder, by having Richard explain exactly what is to occur: “So, when I’ve got the rope around his neck, you say, ‘If you wanna live, give me your address.’ Then once you have it, I’ll crack his skull” (35). Even though the audience never sees it, we cannot help but imagine the murder because of the detailed and vivid description.

Knowing about the murder method is one aspect of the violence; the other is in feeling the victim’s presence, despite his lack of physical existence. Bobby, as an individual, rather than just a concept, is felt throughout Richard’s “conversation” with him:

Would you like to see my roadster?

Would you like to look inside?

It’s a shiny, Packard roadster.

Would you like to take a ride? (35)

Dolginoff even provides a moment where Richard is obviously responding to the (unseen)

Bobby:

I know—never talk to strangers!

That’s what mothers always warn.

But I think we could be buddies.

Sure, I'll let you honk the horn. (36)

A *Time Out* review of the London production, stated, “The song that hits hardest is ‘Roadster’ – a disarmingly charming number, used to lure a young boy to his death. As Maguire [playing Richard], with his china-white face and crystal-clear voice, croons sweet nothings to his invisible victim, the music and content combine to thrilling effect.” Though a physical actor does not play Bobby, the audience is introduced to him by his soon-to-be murderer during “Roadster,” when Richard responds to an apparent introduction—“Bobby’s a nice name” (36). Despite the fact that Bobby is not physically a part of the musical, his presence is imperative to understanding the murder narrative.

Dolginoff also creates an image of Bobby’s corpse, though it never physically appears. A newscaster’s report is heard in voiceover: “the disfigured body of what is believed to be a young boy . . . [a] gruesome discovery, the mutilated boy has been identified as Bobby Franks” (42-3). In theatre, the suggestion of violence is effective enough to create terror and disgust. In a review of Peter Brook’s “famous production of *Titus Andronicus*, which relied heavily on abstract depictions of extreme violence” (Woodworth 18), critic David Benedict commented, “Those expecting a splatter-fest will be disappointed. Everything is done through suggestion, which, of course, is far more harrowing” (qtd. in Woodworth 18). The violence perpetuated in *Thrill Me* is suggestive and descriptive, but does not lack in its ability to terrify.

Additionally, the murder weapons in *Thrill Me* act as a synecdoche, representative of the unseen murder. Prop weaponry suggests a “highly visual code” (Hamill 41) in which the prop item carries with it the weight, severity, and meaning of the real (non-stage) item. In *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer discusses the importance of stage properties: “Invisible on the page

except as textual signifiers, props seduce our attention in the playhouse as they become drawn into the stage action and absorb complex and sometimes conflicting meanings” (2). The props in *Thrill Me* are imbued with significance, in their physical presence, as well as the text that connects the items to the murder:

Wipe the crowbar clean!

Don’t forget the rope!

Wash the bloodstains off

With kitchen soap! (38)

Props are often important visual indicators of the larger narrative; “The power of an object as a sign is what makes props in a play useful as storytelling devices, because a prop can have more visual power as a sign onstage than in ordinary life” (Overman-Tsai 84). Additionally, “Props, as objects that are manipulated within the action of a play, heighten the spectators’ awareness of nonverbal communication, allowing them to feel as if they are in the real world” (Overman-Tsai 87). The prop weapons are material objects that point to the immaterial murder.

Taken individually and without context, the prop items in *Thrill Me* may seem innocuous—a crowbar, bottle of acid, and rope—but because they are linked to the murder event, they carry the signifier of *murder*. Sofer states, “a single material sign-vehicle can convey an unlimited number of meanings in the course of a given performance: an umbrella can become a weapon, a walking stick, a toy, an emblem of middle-class conformity, and so on” (8). After the offstage murder occurs, the murderer-protagonists are seen with bloodied rags, pointing to the invisible victim. In effect, Bobby’s physical presence is in his (onstage) blood. All of these items, along with the violent language, conjure an image of the murder narrative. Sofer argues, “Theatre continually encourages us to take parts for wholes; but it also encourages us to take

holes for parts” (332); the items associated with the murder are the “parts” representative of the “whole” (e.g. the murder), while the murder itself is missing—it is the “hole”—that is filled in by the audience’s imagination. These symbols act as announcements of the murder, dictating to the audience what is about to occur; and later, what has happened offstage. Utilizing Sofer’s theory of “dark matter,” the murder is “unrepresented yet omnipresent. Exerting irresistible force over our imaginations in the playhouse, it invisibly pulls the iron filings of theatrical representation into a pattern. Dark matter comprises *whatever is materially absent onstage but un-ignorable*; it is not a finger pointing at the moon, but the tidal force of gravity that pulls at us unseen” (332; original emphasis). The murder, while never physically enacted onstage, is a considerable aspect of the musical, and the threat of violent action is felt throughout. According to Sofer, “dark matter”—and what “remains unseen”—is responsible for inciting more terror within an audience than do physical objects (332). The murder is “un-ignorable” due to Dolginoff’s language, the unseen—yet present—victim, and the prop signifiers that work together to construct a highly threatening narrative.

It is the musical’s theatricality that propels the audience into the psychology of the murderer-protagonists. The continuous musical underscoring prohibits audience applause, and the songs never musically resolve—both of these musicological techniques create emotional tension. Additionally, the scenic and lighting approaches are minimalistic, and create a claustrophobic feeling that diverts attention to the characters, their violent deed, and their twisted and manipulative relationship. The effect is all at once theatrical and not theatrical—the minimalism highlights the realism of the murder. Without the clutter of “stuff” on the stage, the audience can focus on the relationship and the murder framework. The simplicity of design, casting, and music combine to thrilling and stifling effect. Brian Logan of *The Guardian* said of

the Charing Cross production, “Dolginoff’s throbbing songs . . . suggest the smothering claustrophobia of the relationship.” No scene changes, no applause breaks, just an oppressive continuous musicality and the psychology of the “thrill killers.”

Thrill Me presents one of the most infamous of American murders while subverting the musical theatre marriage convention; in doing so, Dolginoff has constructed an excellent representation of a true crime musical. On reviewing the Madison, Wisconsin production in 2009, Jay Rath called the musical, a “homosexual Jazz Age tale of Chicago’s coldest of cold-blooded killers.” The press release for Know Theatre in Cincinnati said of the musical, “the Leopold and Loeb story remains one of the most interesting stories of psychological manipulation in American history,” and equated the musical to “*Chicago* meets *L.A. Confidential*.” *Thrill Me*, as an example of the true crime musical, “recreate[s] history and personal (or private) experiences . . . as alternative and creative lessons in morality and in the transformative power of performance.”¹² With *Thrill Me*, Dolginoff’s focus on psychological narrative opened a dialogue of possible motive for the “Crime of the Century;” he fictionalized and invented, but focused on the murderer-protagonists’ relationship and how it informed motive. True crime musicals, like docudrama, “redefine criminality by breaking open the ambiguities of motive. The theatricalization of witnessing, the embodiment of the physicalities of crime, and often highly personal, even autobiographical, perspectives are the screens through which the circumstantial evidence of the crimes is sifted” (Risdon 6). *Thrill Me*, while lacking in physical violence, is replete with symbolic violence. According to Peter Brook, this symbology can be more effective than reality. Discussing his 1995 production of *Titus*, Brook said his production brought forth “the most modern of emotions—violence, hatred, cruelty, pain—in a

¹² See the Preface to Michelle Elaine Risdon’s dissertation, *The Scene of the Crime: The True-Crime Docudrama in Contemporary Theater*, (x).

form that, because *unrealistic*, transcended the anecdote and became for each audience *quite abstract and thus totally real*” (qtd. in Woodworth 18, original emphasis). All of the metaphorical and offstage violence contained in *Thrill Me* acts as literary and suggestive “crime porn,” typical of the true crime genre.

Thrill Me conveys American history in the murder narrative, but it also shines a spotlight on an aspect of 1920s American society that is not typically a subject of musical theatre. As previous directors have interpreted, when considering *Thrill Me*’s historical context, the musical presumably highlights the repression of homosexuality, and the lengths to which some people may go for love when that love is demonized by society. However, the musical is not just about homosexuality. In fact, the musical has become extremely popular in South Korea, an area that tends to lean conservatively in regards to homosexuality. I spoke to the Artistic Director of the company that holds the rights to *Thrill Me* in Korea, and she confirmed that the majority of the Korean audience is conservative. She felt that Korean audiences enjoyed the musical—not for its queer themes—but because the musical highlights a murder, and the narrative occurs in an American city—Chicago.¹³ The Korean audience, in particular, seems to enjoy the musical for its “*Americaness*,” that is to say, its focus on a historical American site of violence.

Thrill Me suggests a marriage between conventional love trope to true crime drama. The title conveys this duality—named for the supposed “thrill killers,” as well as hinting at the connotative sexual meaning. Violence in *Thrill Me* occurs because of the dysfunctional romance plot. In “The uses of violence in drama,” Thomas Gould reminds us that violence marks tragedy when it is “violence that is gratuitous . . . suffering or death told or staged in such a way that we feel the terrible unfairness of life” (2). The violence against Bobby is gratuitous, but there is also violence enacted between the two murderer-protagonists. This struggle against violence and love

¹³ Email interview with Hyewon Kim, February 19, 2013.

is what points to the “unfairness of life” that Gould mentions. In this way, the audience may briefly sympathize with Leopold and Loeb, but they will definitely view the entire case as a tragedy for all.

Thrill Me ends in a creepily optimistic manner. After Nathan finishes his story, the Board grants him parole. The Board asks him how he feels about Richard Loeb now. Nathan mentions briefly that Richard was killed in a prison brawl many years ago, saying, “I think if he wasn’t stabbed to death in the shower room so many years ago, I’d have probably ... well ... I don’t suppose I should say that” (61). Dolginoff leaves this ambiguous, but I like to think that Nathan was going to admit that he would still be with Richard after all these years. Nathan does not want to admit his feelings, even after thirty-four years, because he knows the Board would only condemn him. Nathan’s admission would not gain him anything, but his omission suggests societal pressure against his sexuality. Nathan is still hiding. Yet, after Nathan is released, he sees a brief spectral image of his dead lover and smiles to himself. Richard’s apparition at the musical’s end creates an ominous message that Nathan and Richard have yet to be separated even in death. As Nathan sees Richard and smiles to himself, the lovers are reunited. The final lines of the musical suggest that their relationship will continue:

I’m one perfect accomplice

Who’d never betray you—

If you thrill me ...

Thrill me! (62)

In this sense, *Thrill Me* maintains the musical theatre convention to end with the romantic couple’s union; incurable love survives and overcomes death.

CHAPTER 2

“This Cold World Will Remember Us”:
Greed, Legacy and the American Dream in *Bonnie & Clyde*

Clyde and Bonnie came to epitomize the edgy daydreams of the economically and socially downtrodden. Resentful of their own powerlessness and poverty, Barrow Gang fans liked the idea of colorful young rebels sticking it to bankers and cops. Clyde and Bonnie were even better than actors like Jimmy Cagney who committed crimes onscreen, because they were doing it for real. . . . Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker provided distraction for most Americans. Their victims in robberies and shootouts were generally perceived as part of a faceless Them who in some sense deserved what they got.

Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde
Jeff Guin

Death is the wages of sin

“The End of the Line”
Bonnie Parker¹⁴

The engine of an old car sputters and revs in the background as lights come up on a long empty road stretching outwards for miles. Suddenly, the tranquility of the drive is disrupted by massive gunfire. After several seconds of chaos, the scrim that held the image of the abandoned road flies upward, and a shattered and bullet-riddled sedan enters from upstage. Within the vehicle are the blood-splattered bodies of Bonnie and Clyde. This extremely gruesome and blood-soaked image is the opening Prologue of Frank Wildhorn’s latest Broadway musical, *Bonnie & Clyde*, and the infamous “Death Car”¹⁵ provides the context with which audiences view the rest of the musical. The Death Car itself is dramatized as a site of murder, complete with bloodstains on the upholstery and one particularly disturbing representation of a blood splatter on the rear windshield, communicating a lethal head wound. Not only is *Bonnie & Clyde* a particularly grisly musical, but it utilizes the violence against the protagonists as its main

¹⁴ Taken from Jeff Guin’s *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde*.

¹⁵ The “Death Car” became a tourist attraction following Bonnie’s and Clyde’s deaths. The car was displayed at state fairs for much of the next decade. See Jeff Guin’s *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde*.

feature, making it a unique true crime musical. In the previous chapter, we saw how *Thrill Me* psychologized the murder-protagonists, but the audience is never meant to completely sympathize with either Nathan Leopold or Richard Loeb. In *Bonnie & Clyde*, the main victims are Bonnie and Clyde themselves, and the people they kill on their way to fame are inconsequential.

A significant aspect of the true crime musical is in understanding (whether fictionalized or not) the murderer-protagonist(s) motives for the criminal action. In *Thrill Me*, the abusive and oppressive relationship between the duo led to the murder, but while *Bonnie & Clyde* employs the marriage trope as an aspect of the narrative, the romance itself is not the reason behind their criminality. Instead, *Bonnie & Clyde* utilizes one of the other popular conventions in the American musical theatre—that of the American Dream. In traditional musicals, protagonists often have a goal, such as becoming a “star,” gaining money, or changing their social status for the better. In fact, Stacy Wolf states that “the audience’s expectation, if unarticulated, [is] that a Broadway musical will feature a quintessentially American tale of individual victory” (165). This “American Dream” trope is often defined as a “rags to riches” narrative, in which any individual is capable of gaining wealth, fame, or success because of the pioneering spirit that quintessentially characterizes *America* and its people. Some contemporary musicals subvert this convention to draw attention to its own mythology. Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins* (1991), for example, presents the dreams of the historical assassins in order to show the perverted notion of the American Dream, ultimately, cautioning against it. As Raymond Knapp notes in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, “The perspective in *Assassins* runs closely parallel to more conventional narratives detailing the progress of the American dream . . . but it focuses on the shadow of that more hopeful narrative line, projecting a dark and sinister

spirit hovering disturbingly close to America's main road" (163). In *Bonnie & Clyde*, the American Dream trope becomes the main motive for the protagonists' deviance. It is Bonnie's and Clyde's individual interests in gaining fame, fortune, and legacy that lead to their crime-spree, but whereas in *Assassins*, Sondheim cautions against the nation's predisposition towards the Dream, communicating to the audience that we should not emulate the assassins, an analogous message does not exist in *Bonnie & Clyde*'s narrative.

Bonnie & Clyde boasts music by Frank Wildhorn (whose previous works include *Wonderland*, *Jekyll & Hyde*, *The Civil War*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*), lyrics by Don Black (who collaborated with Andrew Lloyd Webber on *Sunset Boulevard*), and a book by Ivan Menchell (*The Cemetery Club*). The musical debuted at the La Jolla Playhouse in California, and it ran from November 10, 2009, through December 20, 2009. The production garnered mixed reviews, though it was named Best Musical by San Diego Theatre Critics Circle.¹⁶ After a significant rewrite,¹⁷ *Bonnie & Clyde* began Broadway previews in 2011. After thirty-three preview performances, the musical officially opened on Broadway's Schoenfeld Theatre, but it closed after a brief thirty-six performances. The production picked up two Tony Award nominations—Best Score and Best Actress in a Musical (Laura Osnes as Bonnie)—but did not receive either accolade. The show was lambasted by most critics—nothing new for a Wildhorn show—who stated that the musical did not go far enough to portray the meaty subject matter. Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* called the musical “near to dead,” while James Hebert of the *U-T San Diego* stated, “When ‘Bonnie & Clyde’ was first announced, there were plenty of snarky comments about the story seeming a patently bad basis for a musical.” The latter

¹⁶ Jones, Kenneth. “Bang! Broadway's *Bonnie & Clyde* Will Close Dec. 30.” *Playbill.com*. 16 Dec. 2011. Web.

¹⁷ According to Menchell, the La Jolla version was more focused on the romance plot. After that production, the creative team decided to add more “social context.” Source: “Producers of *Bonnie & Clyde* Musical Take Aim at Broadway; August 2011 Is Target.” *Playbill.com*. 24 Nov. 2010.

comment suggests that audiences might not want to see this type of musical theatre, however, the show picked up quite a cult following during their very short run. Hebert's comment, though, makes me question audience reception to the true crime musical, and whether these types of stories are meant to be told through the musical structure. What is it about the true crime musical that either appeals to or repels audiences? Despite the extensive criticism against the musical, *Bonnie & Clyde* effectively fits into the true crime musical category, as it marries musical theatre conventions with violence and portrays criminal motive.

In many ways, *Bonnie & Clyde* is a more traditional musical than *Thrill Me*. Influenced by the musicals of the so-called "Golden Age," *Bonnie & Clyde* is ultimately about the American Dream and social issues, wrapped up in a conventional marriage plot, making it more conformist than the musical explored in the previous chapter. According to Stacy Wolf, musicals in the 1950s "used the format of a 'book musical,' where a story, which typically followed a heterosexual romance (or two) to marriage, organized the musical. The songs mapped the emotional journey of the musical, introduced characters, developed relationships, and conveyed the place, time, and tone of the show" (20). *Bonnie & Clyde* meets the criteria of true crime musical; its distinction is in its ability to utilize these conventions, while dramatizing the criminal-protagonists as sympathetic despite their violent and rebellious actions.

Bonnie and Clyde are meant to be sympathetic characters. Wildhorn, et al. invokes the American Dream trope in order to provide context and motive for their criminality. This effectively capitalizes on the historical period in which Bonnie and Clyde lived. Wildhorn also creates a narrative that proposes the violence committed against Bonnie and Clyde is far worse than the violence they commit against others. By creating characters that have dreams, and providing them with a motive for criminality, Wildhorn, et al. makes Bonnie and Clyde more

relatable. If audiences sympathize with and even see themselves (or their dreams) in Bonnie and Clyde, then audiences will support the narrative, despite the criminal-protagonists' less-than-noble actions.

Bonnie and Clyde's criminality surfaces because their dreams do not come to fruition. Rather than participate in the socio-economic structure in which they find themselves, Bonnie and Clyde *steal* the American Dream. Advertising for the musical suggested this concept; during a brief trial at Asolo Repertory in Florida, the tag line for the show read, "Everybody had a dream. They had a plan,"¹⁸ and advertising pointed to the "wild ride that took them from poverty to infamy on a two-year crime spree that tantalized the dark side of America's imagination." *Bonnie & Clyde*, according to Music Theatre International—who holds the rights to the musical—is about "their mutual cravings for excitement and fame [which] immediately set them on a mission to chase their dreams."¹⁹ Kenneth Jones of *Playbill.com* interpreted the narrative slightly differently: "Sex, flesh, violence and American greed — or 'want,' if you will — are major elements in the pop show." Whether we refer to it as greed or the Dream, *Bonnie & Clyde* is as much about living an ideal American Dream as it is about crime. In fact, the writers of the musical suggest that criminality surfaces due to the clash between the American Dream and the Depression-era of the historical Bonnie and Clyde. Asolo Artistic Director Michael Donald Edwards asserted the significance of the protagonists' poverty, even linking the troubles experienced during the Great Depression with contemporary issues:

With the economic nightmare that was the Great Depression suddenly seeming less remote, *Bonnie & Clyde* could not be timelier. Their dreams were totally American: freedom, money and fame. It was their plan that got them into trouble. Their story struck

¹⁸ Asolo Repertory website. <<http://www.asolorep.org/shows/bonnie-clyde/2010-2011>>.

¹⁹ Music Theatre International website, "Bonnie & Clyde." <<http://www.mtishows.com>>.

a chord with so many who felt betrayed by the system and that chord will resonate again in this most American of theatre forms: the musical.²⁰

Thus, the protagonists' motives derive directly from the desperation brought on by severe poverty.

Younger versions of *Bonnie and Clyde*, played by child actors, introduce the protagonists' dreams very early on in the show immediately after the opening Death Car tableau.

As Stacy Wolf mentions:

Songs in musicals are functional in that they *do* something; introduce or explain a character, develop or expand an emotional moment, propel the story or complicate it. In their notes and orchestration, lyrics and vocabulary, songs evoke the musical's setting and convey the moment's tone or mood . . . [a]n opening number helps the audience to get situated in the musical's world; characters' first songs introduce their hopes and desires; characters who sing together belong together. (17)

The order of songs and their construction are imperative to the dramaturgy of musicals, and the opening number is extremely significant in its ability to convey meaning on any number of items, including character, place, or theme.

In traditional musicals that feature the American Dream trope, the lead or leads will sing about their hopes toward the beginning of the show—conventionally, it is the first song that character sings. This song is often referred to as the “I Am/I Want” song, and it functions exactly as the title indicates. The “I Am/I Want” song conveys pertinent information about who the character is and what he or she desires. In typical musical theatre fashion, the character gets what he or she wants by the end of the musical. What is intriguing about *Bonnie & Clyde* is the opening (sung) song is “Picture Show,” a number that is interspersed with dialogue scenes, and

²⁰ Asolo Repertory website. <<http://www.asolorep.org/shows/bonnie-clyde/2010-2011>>.

which features the younger versions of the protagonists. The adult versions (the main cast) sing toward the end of the song, essentially taking on the role from the child actor. In “Picture Show,” Young Bonnie and Young Clyde communicate their dreams to the audience. Young Bonnie sings, “I can see me / I can see me / Livin’ just like Clara” (1). This opening line indicates the period in which Bonnie lives and how she wants a life similar to Clara Bow. Fame is the chief concern for Bonnie: “It must be great to be called the ‘It Girl’ / Your face on every magazine / That’s where I’m gonna end up one day” (2). She also seems consumed by the desire for material wealth: “I wanna be her / I wanna be her / Dressed in style like Clara” (2). Clearly, Wildhorn wants the audience to know very early in the show what drives Bonnie.

It is fame and wealth that will one day attract Bonnie to a criminal life. After Bonnie meets Clyde, he asks her to join him on the road, and she initially turns him down. When he tempts her to join him through the wealth they will gain after he commits a few burglaries, she changes her mind. He entices her:

Don’t you think it’s time
That you lost that egg-stained apron
And wore somethin’ made of satin
From a fine Manhattan store (13).

He further tempts her with her own dream of fame and celebrity: “Your face should be up on the silver screen / You got that ‘It Girl’ look” (13). Clyde’s suggestion that Bonnie will one day be a star is what eventually tempts her to join him. Bonnie goes, thinking she will move to Hollywood with him, but instead, their criminal life takes over. In a traditional Golden Age musical, the female lead would advance from “poor waitress” type to celebrity status on her own merits, but in *Bonnie & Clyde*, she takes her own celebrity through criminal action.

Young Clyde's version of the "Picture Show" "I Want/I Am" song lacks subtlety, but it clearly demonstrates a need for criminality, which he associates with power and fame:

I wanna live the life of an outlaw
I'm gonna be like Billy the Kid
And when the law has got me surrounded no doubt
I'm gonna shoot my way out. (3)

He later adds:

Billy I want to be you
Bang bang you're dead
Bang bang you're dead
Ain't nothin' I can't do with a gun. (3)

Despite the lyrics lacking sophistication, the song does an adequate job of demonstrating the two young protagonists' dreams. The song also clearly delineates a "hero" for each—Clara Bow for Bonnie, indicating her desire for fame; and Billy the Kid for Clyde, indicating his desire for criminality. Later in the musical, Clyde adjusts his hero to Al Capone, stating:

I'm gonna be the guy kids look up to
They'll cut their hair the way I cut mine
Capone was just like me when he started—some guy
He made it big—and so will I. (7)

Both characters want celebrity, though one is a more "acceptable" dream than the other. Even though the characters do not sing to one another—or acknowledge one another in any way—the fact that they sing together demonstrates that they are destined to be together. They sing the same music, and that musicological link means they will wind up on the same path (literally and

figuratively), which supports the conventional romance, but also proves that their dreams are the same. Bonnie's dream of fame and Clyde's dream for criminal stardom are musically connected, which demonstrates that the two are undeniably related.

Despite her initial reluctance to crime, Bonnie becomes a willing participant in Clyde's criminal cause. The musical often suggests that Bonnie is only a criminal because she loves Clyde, but it is the fame she enjoys. She is consumed by a desire to be famous, but she ultimately fails to become an actress. Wildhorn, et al. argues dramaturgically that the United States' socio-economic condition is the reason behind Bonnie's inability to escape her waitressing job, but in fact, the musical never shows her attempts to pursue the Dream through conventional means. Presumably, since she is unable to become an actress, Bonnie accepts the next best thing, which is to be famous for being on the run. Bonnie's first solo is "How 'Bout a Dance?" a motif that runs throughout the entire musical, and serves as her anthem. According to Stacy Wolf, "The female principal's first musical number . . . introduces and defines her character, who she says she is, and what she wants."²¹ "How 'Bout a Dance?" is Bonnie's individual "I Am/I Want" song, and even though the lyrics do not explicitly state what Bonnie wants, the song concept characterizes her; since the song is diegetic, it establishes Bonnie as performative and demonstrates her desire to be a singer. Bonnie obviously learned the tune somewhere, considering that Clyde calls it "one of [his] favorites" (27). We hear the tune at the top of the show and again at the end, which reminds the audience of Bonnie's dreams, which had at one point, been innocent. Some of the lyrics may suggest Bonnie's own life:

How 'bout a dance

Let's make a start

Music like this can really throw ya

²¹ Wolf, Stacy. *Changed for Good*, page 166.

You'll lose the blues and you may lose your heart. (27)

Both the “dance” and the “music” signify the tumultuous life Bonnie experienced while on the run with Clyde, who essentially “throws” her off course, as she falls in love with him, but the song’s main function is to convey one significant fact—that Bonnie should be viewed as a *performer*. Later on in the musical, she convinces herself to join in Clyde’s crimes by remembering a plot to a movie: “Did you see the movie, ‘Shadow of the Law?’ Bow has no choice but to join a criminal gang – so she pretends to go crooked. But really she’s carefully plottin’ her—” (72); only after she remembers a plot wherein her hero pretends to be a crook, is Bonnie able to keep the engine running in their escape car. Bonnie views her criminality as a performance, and she adores the fame it provides her. Once their exploits are substantial enough to warrant coverage in the newspapers, Bonnie enjoys her celebrity, but feels the journalists missed something imperative:

I wish there was a picture. They should have pictures to go along with this. . . . Just seems a shame not to have a nice big picture of me to go along side where it says ‘ravishin’ redhead.’ Or the cover! I want my picture on the cover! Who do we gotta hold up to get my picture on the cover?! (100)

One running gag in the show is the ongoing dispute over whose name should be listed first in their criminal pursuits. As Brantley mentions, they are “egomaniacs, who regularly quarrel . . . about who should get top billing in news accounts of their crimes. Like so many young folks today, they just want to be stars.” Bonnie takes “top billing,” and devours her status as a celebrity, even to the point of giving autographs to hostages (89).

Overcoming poverty becomes a large motive for Bonnie and Clyde’s escapades, which emulates the historical background of these famous renegades. *Bonnie & Clyde* effectively

utilizes the Great Depression as a backdrop for the larger narrative. The musical depicts both Bonnie and Clyde as poor from an early age, the financial crisis leaving both wanting for clothes, shelter, and material goods. Young Clyde's family has to move because his father, who is a sharecropper, lost his job. They move to West Dallas, a slum that Young Clyde calls "the Devil's back porch" (3). When Young Bonnie's father dies, her mother tells her, "With your father gone we can't afford to stay in Rowena" (4). They, too, relocate to West Dallas, "a shit hole" (4). I mentioned earlier that Young Bonnie desires the wealth that comes with celebrity; Young Clyde also expresses an interest in material wealth:

I'm gonna make a whole lot of money
I won't count cents like my Ma and Pa
I will wear Sunday clothes on a
Tuesday – some day
No one will stand in my way (5).

This verse coincides with dialogue that discusses Young Clyde's thieving ways, thereby linking his criminality with his desire to have money. It is obvious that the Barrows are living poorly; they live in a "Squatters' Camp" and when the police decide to drag little Clyde off to juvenile detention, he exclaims that it is "a step up from the damn tent" (5) they live in. By creating the considerable roadblock out of the socio-economic environment, Wildhorn, et al. pay homage to another musical theatre convention—that of plots "built around social issues with love stories at their core" (Stempel 335).

The poverty-stricken environment of the 1930s Depression-era America becomes an immense background for the criminal narrative. The overall design concept, including Aaron Rhyne's Dust Bowl video projections and Tobin Ost's weathered wooden sets and distressed

costumes, effectively creates a sepia-tinged, depressed landscape in which the characters are hungry, sad, and disillusioned. The depressing environment leaves the characters with few options for legitimate work. When Clyde's delinquent brother Buck agrees to go back to prison to serve out the rest of his sentence (at his wife's request), Clyde angrily wonders, "and what are you gonna get when you get out?! You're gonna come back here?! And work doin' what?! Pickin' up scrap metal for three cents a load?! Or maybe with Pa at the gas station, prayin' somebody rich enough to still own a car stops in!" (41). Clyde is not one to become a victim of poverty: "I'm gonna be in control of my life! I'm gonna live the way I want!" (41-2). Clyde realizes that there are few jobs available, and even if he were to get a job, he knows he will never make the money he desires to live comfortably. In this way, Clyde's criminality circumvents the labor structure that ultimately failed his family.

Though money is a chief concern for Clyde, it is the legacy he is ultimately after: "The men in this town / Live and die and are forgotten / And it doesn't seem to scare 'em" (12-13). Nothing frightens Clyde more than the concept that people will forget him. Clyde's individual "I Am/I Want" song is "This World Will Remember Me," in which he links the poverty-filled town with a desire to become famous for his crimes:

I can't wait to get away
Away from the drought
And the homeless and the hungry
Where they talk about foreclosures
Every hot and dusty day
...
If I can pull just three jobs a year

I'll be rich, I'll have wealth and fame

Everyone'll know my name

...

Every kid will idolize Clyde Barrow (12-13)

In this section, lyricist Don Black makes it clear that Clyde will use crime as a means to gain wealth—a wealth he desperately craves after having been poor all of his young adult life and adolescence—and legacy. At the end of Act One, Bonnie joins him for a reprise version of the song, appropriating his music, dream, and criminal ways:

Two living legends that's what we will be

...

We are making dang sure that we leave our mark

You don't leave your mark by diggin' ditches

No wonder we're who they'll discuss

Yes this world will remember us

This cold world will remember us. (70)

Neither Bonnie nor Clyde want a life of “diggin’ ditches;” they both desire fame and legacy. When faced with “Depression and bread lines” (88), these characters turn to robbery and murder in order to gain their Dream. Bonnie and Clyde avoid working within the depressed socio-economic environment, as it provides little opportunity to gain the Dream through lawful means. Rather, they create the Dream for themselves, stealing their fame and wealth.

Bonnie & Clyde also utilizes the depressed setting as a way of presenting the socio-economic issue that the law often disproportionately perceives criminality within poorer groups. This is explored in a scene between Clyde, Buck, and Buck's wife Blanche:

CLYDE. It don't make no difference what we do – they been arrestin' us since we was kids.

BLANCHE. You've been stealing since you was kids.

CLYDE. Even when we didn't.

BUCK. (*to Blanche*) That is true.

CLYDE. How many times they come by our tent and haul us in for no damn reason?

BUCK. Plenty (40-1).

If the law is already against them and identifies them as criminals, then why not act out that reputation? Clyde further exclaims, “Don't make no difference what we do. The laws are gonna keep comin' after us. . . . I ain't never gonna be set free, Blanche. Freedom is somethin' I gotta steal” (41). This exchange suggests that Clyde will take on the mantle of crime since the police already assume he will be deviant.

Bonnie and Clyde stand in contrast to the rest of the musical's characters, some of which also suffer from the abysmal financial situation. These characters understand why Bonnie and Clyde steal, and hail them as heroes; the remaining characters are opposed to the criminal-protagonists and are meant to be unlikeable. A typical dramaturgical conceit in musicals is in making antagonistic characters unsympathetic by taking away their song. Typically, unlikeable characters in musicals sing either poorly or not at all, as Scott McMillin notes in his book, *The Musical as Drama*. He states, “The heart of the musical is the projection of musical ability . . . Those who do not sing and dance are lesser characters. They stand out because they have no music” (67). The members of the posse who eventually kill Bonnie and Clyde never sing (with the exception of Ted Hinton, who acts as a potential romantic interest for Bonnie). Other characters who sympathize with Bonnie and Clyde's thievery include the community at large,

who also suffer from the debilitating extreme poverty, and in traditional musical theatre fashion, the ensemble “embodies the community and its values” (Wolf 202).

The community becomes a huge presence during the opening to Act Two, “Made in America,” a song that was created after the La Jolla trial in order to provide much needed social context for the protagonists’ motives.²² During this song, the Preacher sings to his congregation, “I don’t care how hard the hardship / No one has a right to steal” (71), in response to the fact that Bonnie and Clyde have become heroes to the depressed masses. The Preacher signifies authority, and despite being a man of God, he represents the institutions that have been unable to provide comfort to those “With just pennies in [their] purse[s]” (71). As the Preacher sings, a bread line forms upstage, and they explain why Bonnie and Clyde have committed their robberies:

You can’t blame those kids for wantin’

To fill up their shopping bags

City Hall is low on kindness

But it don’t run out of flags

...

They both grew up hungry

They were heading nowhere

Thanks to Good Old USA

...

Sure they robbed some men

And they will again

Poor kids ah but then

²² Jones, Kenneth. “Producers of *Bonnie & Clyde* Musical Take Aim at Broadway; August 2011 is Target.” *Playbill.com*, 24 Nov. 2010.

They were made in America. (73)

The song points to the fact that America has let down its people. The song also comments on the mythology of the American Dream: “They had holes in every shoe / No dream can come true / They stole wouldn’t you ...” (74). The community not only supports Bonnie and Clyde, but they also understand that they are stealing their American Dream, since it will not come to them.

Bonnie and Clyde’s criminality is not only a reaction to the poverty they experience, but also it exists as a way of “paying back” American institutions for failing them. Bonnie and Clyde only rob from The System—banks, stores, gas stations. They never rob individuals. It stops short of a “rob from the rich, give to the poor” ideal, as they keep everything for themselves and their families, but the robberies are notably committed against places that *should* have enough money to afford being robbed (at least in Bonnie and Clyde’s opinion). However, during one scene in particular, Bonnie and Clyde are in the process of robbing a bank, and the teller informs them that the bank is out of money and closing (90). Clyde is angry and wants to take it out on the teller:

CLYDE. You own every piece of land in the country – everybody’s damn farm. How can you have no money?!

TELLER. Who are we going to sell the farms to? No one can afford to buy them.

CLYDE. I should shoot you right now. (91)

Clyde’s response is an emotional and incredulous reaction; it is unbelievable that the bank, which ruined the lives of numerous Americans through foreclosures, is so broke that it does not have any money for them to rob. Clyde also retorts, “I lived in a camp three miserable years! Bank took the farms of near everybody I know!” and the customers respond with phrases such as, “Took mine!; Took every penny I had!; Let him have it!; Hell, shoot up the place!” (91),

reinforcing the statement that it is the poor community against the institutions, and that criminality is either warranted or championed.

Wildhorn, et al. create greedy characters in Bonnie and Clyde, but they are still sympathetic characters, due not only to the times in which they live, but also because the violence that is ultimately committed against them is far worse than the violence they perpetrate against others. Clyde is beaten by the guards and repeatedly raped by a fellow inmate (offstage, and only implied) during his incarceration at Eastham Penitentiary. After this traumatic experience, Clyde snarls his hatred for the “laws,” since they were fully aware of the situation and did nothing to help him, instead choosing to mock Clyde and refer to his rapist as “friendly” (62). The only member of the law who has the potential to be likeable is Ted Hinton, who serves initially as a love interest for Bonnie, but because he punches Clyde without cause (49) and Bonnie does not like him, the audience is unlikely to sympathize with him. All of the police officers, then, are representative of the law—in the same way the Preacher represents the Church—that has disappointed people like Bonnie and Clyde.

Clyde’s incarceration is the first time we see violence onstage, after the Death Car tableau from the Prologue. Clyde, visibly shaken and covered in bloodied cuts and bruises, sings “Raise a Little Hell,” a song that acts as a turning point for him, in which Clyde protests that he cannot allow himself to be violated anymore:

I can’t take no more of this
This nightmare has to end
In this God forsaken place
Death would be a welcome friend. (62)

Clyde also suggests that what the “laws” have consigned him to does not fit his crime:

All I did was rob a few stores

Justice here don't fit the crime

I've been broken by the devil

Justice is a waste of time. (62)

These opening lyrics communicate both Clyde's torment and the corrupted state of the prison system, which encourages the audience to sympathize with Clyde rather than the law. Clyde becomes suicidal, initially thinking that he might be able to get a guard to kill him in order to escape the torture. Wildhorn places Clyde in the most brutal of situations, and then takes him to the brink of suicide, as a way of making his future actions reasonable. When the guards tell Clyde that his rapist wants to see him again, Clyde snaps and decides to kill him first. The lyrics defend Clyde's actions as self-defense, and therefore understandable:

He'll see me but it's the last time

That filthy scum has gotta go

By tonight it will be over

When I strike the fatal blow

No way out I gotta do this

Him or me okay let's play

Never killed but now I have to

Time to make Ed Crowder pay. (64)

Clyde takes a pipe from a hidden floorboard; he turns upstage and begins wailing away with the pipe against a wooden beam. A projection of a newspaper headline reads "Eastham Inmate Beaten To Death. No suspect" (64). The audience can forgive Clyde's actions because the victim is "filthy scum," and it was ultimately a "Him or me" situation.

Not only are Clyde's actions somewhat defensible, but the audience does not see him kill Crowder. This staging decision effectively removes the audience from the violence, making Clyde less intimidating. In fact, actor Jeremy Jordan (of the Original Broadway Cast) and director Jeff Calhoun seem to have taken significant steps to make Clyde charming rather than menacing. Often, his criminality is shown as comedic. During one of his early robberies, Clyde appears charming while holding up a storeowner at gunpoint: "I don't want to have to use this gun, mister, but I'll tell ya right now I will blow your ... Are those seats leather? Dang, that is a beautiful car. You are one lucky fella. I mean, well you know, until now" (46). Not only is the line amusing, but also it is significant that Clyde does not finish the sentence, which would characterize him as too violent for him to be viewed as sympathetic.

Clyde kills other people during the course of the musical. Most of them are police officers, but their deaths are made insignificant, as no time is spent discussing them or in viewing their bodies. In one instance, Clyde shoots a deputy, and as blood packets burst and seep his costume, Young Clyde comes onstage and sings, "Bang bang you're dead / Bang bang you're dead / Ain't nothin' I can't do with a gun" (77), thereby reminding the audience of Clyde's humanity and lessening the impact of the kill. Clyde's actions are also once again seen as self-defense, as the deputy shot at him first. Despite the "fair amount of onstage bloodletting,"²³ the narrative (rightly) focuses on the criminal-protagonists, and their victims are not onstage long enough for the audience to truly register their deaths. While in *Thrill Me*, we had a very *present* victim and murder, despite the musical's lack of literal violence, in *Bonnie & Clyde*, the title characters' victims are unseen, even though they die onstage.

Bonnie and Clyde rarely speak of the people they kill; there is one instance in particular when Clyde expresses regret and Bonnie threatens to leave him. In contrast, there are several

²³ Brantley, Ben. "Armed and Amorous, Committing Cold-Blooded Musical." *New York Times*, 1 Dec. 2011.

scenes between the posse members discussing their plans to kill the duo. They articulate little remorse at their plot to ambush the famous criminals (“I want to walk down Main Street with Clyde Barrow’s head on a stick;” “Just get me within three hundred yards of him and I’ll put a bullet through his neck”), and the only character who is remotely sympathetic is Ted, who exclaims, “Since when did we get into the business of murderin’ people?” (109). Ted refers to their plans as “murder,” while Clyde’s actions are self-defense. Wildhorn, et al. wants the audience against the posse members. In fact, the posse is only able to track the criminal-protagonists down because they risk capture in order to visit with their families (124). This, of course, makes them human, and vilifies the posse. Lastly, as the posse plots their demise, the young versions of Bonnie and Clyde enter onstage and sing a short reprise of their “I Am/I Want” song, reminding the audience of their dreams and their—at one point—innocence.

Calhoun also made the smart decision to use projections throughout the musical to create not only a sense of time and place, but to emphasize Bonnie and Clyde’s humanity. Throughout the production, various photographs of the historical Bonnie and Clyde are projected, reminding the audience that these are not characters, but real people who lived and died. Some of the more gruesome projections include a video of the aftermath of the Death Car shootout, and photographs of the deceased Bonnie and Clyde lying on a coroner’s slab. In the true crime literary genre, authors utilize what I have mentioned previously as “crime porn”—images of autopsies, corpses, blood splatters, etc.—what Murley calls “full-on visual body horror” (5). *Bonnie & Clyde* fully embraces this aspect of true crime, but the use of autopsy imagery serves another function—one that may seem surprising. According to Elizabeth Klaven, autopsy can be thought of as “a form of memorialization, for the procedure substitutes the plastination of language for the flesh of the cadaver, before the cadaver slips away. Autopsy is a way of ‘doing’

something with the corpse, of retrieving it from the garbage can of the abject, whether that ‘doing’ turns out to be utile, spectacular, thought-provoking, or beautiful” (qtd. in Perdigao 208). In effect, the autopsy images of Bonnie and Clyde create meaning long after their deaths, and instigate an emotional response within the audience. By using autopsy and the Death Car tableau, *Bonnie & Clyde* supports autopsy’s purpose to “[r]epresent the desire to mourn, to remember, and to memorialize” (Perdigao 208). Both the Death Car and the autopsy footage act as a way to memorialize the criminal-protagonists, and embrace the legacy that the two desired.

This brings me back to how I started this chapter—the Death Car. Bodies onstage are significant, and highly irregular in musicals. In *Death in American Texts and Performances*, Perdigao and Pizzato state, “Corpses, as abject objects, display the loss of a living person” (1), and “[t]he performance of death onstage stresses the audience’s own proximity to death” (3). In *Bonnie & Clyde*, the corpses of the title characters become performative and live on in the audience’s minds, but the other deceased characters (including the various “laws” and even Clyde’s brother Buck) do not have performative corpses. They are quickly discarded and forgotten, but Bonnie’s and Clyde’s bodies remain onstage at length. Their bodies are never escorted offstage or buried (like Buck’s is), and therefore, their bodies continue to have dramatic purpose. Additionally, Bonnie and Clyde do not die again at the end of the musical, but are seen driving down the dirt road which will become their murder site. This effectively recalls the Death Car tableau from the Prologue, and leaves the audience with its lingering image, which signifies that Bonnie’s and Clyde’s corpses are still performing long after the performed event concludes. While *Thrill Me* was about the crime committed against the unseen Bobby, *Bonnie & Clyde* reverses audience’s empathy and subverts expectation by making the most significant violent

action against the protagonists. It is *their* murder that both closes and opens the musical, and becomes the most devastating visual for the spectator.

The violence against Bonnie and Clyde is deeply disturbing, and must have an impact on audiences. In her article, “Performance of Violence and the Ethics of Spectatorship,” Lisa Fitzpatrick states, “In performance, violence that is made to ‘look’ real and artless draws attention to the body in the space, and by revealing the unstylized effects of violence such as noise and breathlessness it hints at the possibility of ‘real’ danger, ‘real’ pain and harm” (61-2). As a musical, *Bonnie & Clyde* is inherently artificial; however, the production utilizes all of the naturalistic blood elements to create a realistic and horrific picture of violence. Stage “blood marks the level of abstraction of a particular piece of theatre” (Woodsworth 11); whereas *Thrill Me* showed a severe lack of onstage blood, but a tremendous amount of symbolic blood, *Bonnie & Clyde* dramatizes realistic murders, complete with blood packet equipped actors. Woodworth argues, “A realistic use of blood in the theatre can sometimes be all the more disturbing than in film or television precisely because of the nature of live performance, the physical presence of actors, and the specific challenge inherent in utilizing blood props believably over the course of countless performances” (18). In the case of Wildhorn’s musical, it is the grotesque violence (which includes the realistic blood effects) against the lead characters that undoubtedly makes the audience cringe.

Despite knowing the outcome from the start of the musical—if not before entering the theatre—audiences are likely to be upset by the musical’s level of violence against Bonnie and Clyde. In *Theatres of Human Sacrifice*, Mark Pizzato argues that violence can be viewed as necessary when “portrayed melodramatically, with clear-cut villains who deserve the pain and heroes who ultimately triumph over fear, suffering, and conflict” (3), but that is not the case here.

Also, as I mentioned in the Introduction, true crime books tend to end with the murderer(s) behind bars or dead, demonstrating a—as Murley states—“good old-fashioned reordering of the chaos wrought by crime” (3). However, there is no sense of optimism at the end of *Bonnie & Clyde*; there is no joy or relief in their deaths, because the musical constructs the narrative in such a way that their criminality seems justified. Wildhorn, et al. wants the audience to sympathize with the criminal-protagonists rather than their executioners, and thus, Bonnie and Clyde become the real victims in this true crime musical.

As I have demonstrated, the true crime musical can manifest itself with varying degrees of enacted onstage violence, but ultimately, the violent intent and murder narrative is what makes a musical true crime. These types of musicals can entertain, but questions concerning audience reception and interest remain. Regardless, the true crime musical can assist in making meaning, as a narrative focus on motive becomes essential, and can point to deficiencies within our own society or highlight flaws of the past. In *Thrill Me*, Dolginoff created a subversive marriage plot that was steeped in a tension-filled murder narrative. In *Bonnie & Clyde*, the main focus of the narrative was in securing legacy and in stealing the American Dream in the midst of a depressed economic crisis. Whereas the minimalistic design concept for *Thrill Me* supports the psychology of its characters, *Bonnie & Clyde* is a traditional Broadway show in scope and spectacle. This design concept, while appropriate for Broadway standards, further supports the concept that the protagonists are influenced primarily from outward forces—poverty, childhood problems, sexual assault. *Thrill Me*’s focus on the simplistic creates the claustrophobic feeling that the audience is sharing the murderer-protagonists’ headspace. This perfectly captures the internal, psychologized focus that Dolginoff created. Regardless of size, the true crime musical generates questions of society, identity, motive, and desire, and presents these questions wrapped up in one or more

murder narratives. Just as in true crime literature, the true crime musical secures infamy for its subjects, reminding us of their indiscretions long after they have died, while providing the entertainment value that musical theatre lovers enjoy. In essence, true crime as pop culture literature is a perfect marriage for the equally popular American musical.

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